

# Tribute to a soldier, patient... and hero

Surgeon Norman Briffa visited the military cemetery in Pietà to pay his respects to the one of the first soldiers to have heart surgery.  
Photo: Chris Sant Fournier

## Maltese surgeon visits grave of a remarkable war victim

Patrick Cooke

A UK-based Maltese cardiac surgeon last week paid respects at the grave of a British soldier he believes was one of the first in the world to undergo successful heart surgery.

Norman Briffa's trip to the military cemetery in Pietà last Wednesday was the culmination of more than a year's research into the case of Private Robert Hugh Martin.



British soldier Private Robert Hugh Martin.

Private Martin of the 1st Derbyshire Yeomanry Regiment was on horseback when he was shot in the chest on his 21st birthday in Salonika, Greece, in November 1917.

He had enlisted to fight in World War I despite being underage after a young woman had shown him a white feather, which symbolised cowardice, when he was on his way to Dore and Totley train station in Sheffield.

Wearing a poppy in memory of the war dead, who will be honoured in today's Remembrance Day services, Mr Briffa, 51, explained that Private Martin was transported to Malta with a bullet lodged in his heart on board the hospital ship *Glenart Castle*.

One of his stretcher bearers when he arrived in Malta was from the same town as Private Martin and remarked, "It's a long way from Dore and Totley isn't it Bob".

A successful operation to remove the bullet was carried out at St Elmo's Hospital in Valletta.

The *Daily Malta Chronicle* reported at the time that the operation "attracted extraordinary interest and attention" and was "the talk of the island".

Malta was known as the 'Nurse of the Mediterranean' in World War I as many injured Allied soldiers were evacuated to the island for treatment.

Despite the success of the operation, Private Martin died of septicaemia in March 1918 and was buried in Pietà.

"It is very touching to see his grave," said Mr Briffa after he and his wife Susan spent a

moment of quiet reflection at Private Martin's final resting place.

Private Martin's great-niece brought the case to Mr Briffa's attention last year after she attended a talk in Sheffield by Mr Briffa on the history of cardiac surgery.

Mr Briffa was initially "respectfully sceptical" about the story as efforts to perform chest and cardiac surgery did not really commence until the 1920s, according to most surgical history books.

### "His story deserves to be remembered"

Many text books ascribe initial efforts at surgery to treat heart and major vascular injuries to Dwight Harken, a US Army surgeon stationed in England in World War II.

However, after exhaustive research, Mr Briffa discovered that British surgeons in World War I did attempt to operate on bullet injuries to the heart. Among them was Sir Charles Ballance, who worked in Malta during World War I.

Mr Briffa, who lives and works in Sheffield, said he enjoys history and he found the story of Private Martin fascinating.

"His story and the story of the surgeon who operated on him deserve to be remembered," Mr Briffa said.

## Two injured in car crash

Two Gozitan men were injured yesterday, one of them seriously, when the vehicle they were travelling in hit a wall.

Police said the incident happened in Triq il-Prajjet, Mellieha, at 3.40am when a 24-year-old man from Kerċem lost control of an Isuzu Gemini.

He escaped with slight injuries, while his 27-year-old passenger from Victoria was in a serious condition.

## Garage goes up in flames

Two cars were destroyed early yesterday when a garage in Munxar was engulfed in flames.

The police said the two cars - a Mazda and Fiat - were parked in the garage when the fire was reported at 2.55am in il-Munxar street.

Members of the Civil Protection Department went on site to extinguish the blaze. No one was injured.

## Ban animal circuses - AD

*Alternattiva Demokratika* yesterday called for a ban on circuses that use animals.

AD chairman Michael Briguglio said at a press conference: "While AD values circuses as sites of entertainment, these should not be allowed to use animals, due to the exploitation involved."

Dr Briguglio said Greece had become the first European country to ban all animals in circuses and the UK Government had passed legislation that would lead to the banning of wild animals in circuses.

Other European countries including Austria, Portugal, Denmark and Croatia have either banned or are phasing out the use of wild animals in circuses. He said Bolivia, Peru, Paraguay and China had also banned such circuses and the US was considering similar legislation.

## WIN A HOT LAP WITH LEWIS HAMILTON

The Sunday Times and Vodafone are offering one lucky reader the chance to sit beside Vodafone McLaren Mercedes driver Lewis Hamilton for one hot lap in a Mercedes sports car during his visit to Malta on December 9.

To be in with a chance of sitting in the seat next to the 2008 World Champion, answer the second of four questions appearing in *The Sunday Times*. This competition forms part of Vodafone's Raise Your Game Campaign.

Entrants must fill out their details in the space provided, collect ALL four cut-outs and post them to The Sunday Times Lewis Hamilton Competition, 341 St Paul Street, Valletta, VLT 1211, by November 28. The winner will be announced on December 2.

### QUESTION 2

When did Lewis Hamilton join McLaren?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_  
Address: \_\_\_\_\_

THE SUNDAY TIMES

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#### TERMS AND CONDITIONS

• When the deadline for entries expires, the winner will be chosen at random by an Allied Group employee at Strickland House, 341 St Paul Street, Valletta. The first correct entry chosen at random will be considered the winner. • The winner will be notified by phone. Their name will be published in Allied publications and on timesofmalta.com. • In the event that the winner cannot be contacted or refuses the prize, the prize will be forfeited and an alternate winner will be selected from all remaining eligible entries. • The Times, The Sunday Times and timesofmalta.com reserve the right to publish the name and photos of the winner and to provide additional coverage related to the prize at the editor's discretion. • The winner accepts that he/she is responsible ensuring he/she is medically fit to claim the prize and enters at his/her own risk. • Competition is not open to employees of Allied Group or Vodafone Malta or their spouses, partners, parents or children. • Entry is free and open to Malta residents aged 18 and over. A government issued ID card is needed as proof that the winner is a Malta resident.